

Chapter 1

He blinked at the green ceiling.

His dreams had been almost pleasant but unsettling nonetheless. He'd traveled back to Sparta.

Not the 'after' Sparta when his school days were over for the time being, when his father walked around with the permanent mask of shock on his face and their house went up for sale. Those 'after' days were all foggy and indistinct anyhow. They belonged in the 'shit happens' pile; he'd learned to accept them and move on.

No, in this dream he'd traveled back to the Sparta 'before'. Sparta of thick forests and steep hills, Sparta scented with moss, pear trees and sweetbay magnolias. His mother's mint and his father's cigarettes. The early morning bells of Baptist churches. He'd traveled back in time, fitting neatly into the body of his log gone twelve year old self, careless and content.

It left him disoriented.

He sat up slowly, stiff from the unfamiliar mattress. The room still faintly smelled like paint; he'd kept the windows open for a couple of days then had to close them or freeze. The September nights were much colder than he'd expected. He'd gotten used to the California heat.

The first rays of sun skimmed the window glass. Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog barked. Other than that lonely sound, the house felt eerily silent and empty. Tired and slightly anxious, he was tempted to crawl back under the covers and call it a day.

Instead he got up and started getting dressed.

He was half-way down the stairs when his father called out,

"Mark?"

"Yup," he confirmed it.

He was getting used to it. In the beginning, it was strange, this odd habit of his father's. Who else would it be? It was just two of them, rattling away in the different parts of the enormous house like two marbles in an oversized can. He supposed it might take some adjusting, having another person around, although they rarely ever crossed paths.

After five years apart they were little more than strangers, tip toeing around each other day and day out. Mark was grateful for that part at least. He'd gotten used to making his own decisions.

"I made coffee," his father peered at him over the top of his morning paper.

"Thank you."

The kitchen was flooded in light. It was equipped for a man who knew how to cook and preferred not to. For the last four weeks the two of them crossed paths in the kitchen once a day. The early morning coffee. Their meals so far had consisted of take out.

Pouring himself a large mug full from the industrial sized coffee maker, Mark sat down at the kitchen table. This had become somewhat of the morning routine and he saw no reason to break it today. Wordlessly, his father handed him the Arts section and for a while nothing was heard but the rustle of the paper.

Then his father cleared his throat,

“Do you want my truck?”

Mark shrugged,

“I was gonna take the bike.”

“It’s getting cold out.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll get the car on the road this weekend.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

Draining out the last of his coffee, Mark got up and rinsed the mug.

It was time to go.

The High School was unexpectedly large for such a small town and in the process of becoming larger. On the west side a new wing was almost completed, the brick poppy red in the sunlight. The four tier parking lot was crowded and loud. Eyes followed him as he searched for a parking space. Despite the vast multitude of cars and trucks, his looked to be the only motorcycle. Not something he’d considered. Would he be labeled as a rebel before even entering the school?

Parking the bike in the tier closest to the main entrance, he accepted the fact that the day might just be a disaster. Obediently, he ran through a list of the worst possible scenarios in his mind. A useful exercise because it always turned out that none of those scenarios were earth shattering. He was entirely capable of living through each and every one of them.

Feeling decidedly calmer, he locked the bike, tucked his helmet under his arm and made his way into the school.

With each class, the process grew easier.

Of course, the people around him stared and whispered. He hadn’t expected anything less. They would stare for some days yet, until they grew accustomed to the sight of his face. It would be a while before someone grew enough balls to ask him about it. Mark was ready. His cover story had worked well for years now; there had been no reason to change it.

The classes were large enough where he never felt singled out. The cafeteria he avoided all together, using the lunch period to explore the library. One step at a time.

The last class of the day started just like the five before it and by then he was feeling a cautious sense of relief. He managed to scout out a seat in the back and was promptly forgotten. In less than an hour he would be free to go, having suffered the minimal amount of discomfort. This last year of High School was looking more and more bearable by the minute.

The class was given a pop quiz. He was excused from it since the class in his old High School was quite a few lessons behind. While they labored over the Latin translations, he made an effort to catch up. One by one, the people around him got up to pass their papers in. The kid to Mark’s right stood up and as he brushed past, Mark caught a strong scent of mint. With the last night’s dream still lingering somewhere in the back of his head, Mark looked up

only to catch the sight of shoulder length blonde hair before the kid went down, landing heavily in between the two desks ahead of him.

He'd been tripped by the girl sitting in front of Mark. Mark saw her foot pull back once the kid was on the ground. It had been intentional, he would bet his life on it.

The teacher stood up,

"Nick, are you all right?"

The kid slowly got to his feet,

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

Mark saw the kid glance at the girl and fully expected to hear a confirmation of what he'd just seen.

"I tripped."

The teacher took the quiz from him,

"Do you need to go see the nurse?"

"No. I'm fine."

The kid sat back down and Mark snuck a glance at his profile. Where his skin was not translucently pale it was beet red. He seemed to be trying to hide behind the curtain of hair, his stare locked on the book in front of him, his hands clenched together under the table. He was almost pretty for the lack of a better word.

Mark looked away. It was none of his business.

By the end of that first week he was a celebrity. It started with James, the kid from his Trigonometry class. The tall, dark, and handsome type, the President of the Debate team and as it turned out, the Class President. The type of kid who saw it as his duty to introduce himself to anyone new and give them pointers on life in Sandy Neck. Mark didn't hold it against him; he supposed the world needed all kinds of people, even the annoying kind. James was the one who opened the floodgates. He introduced him to everyone he could think of, most of them being the people Mark would ordinarily try and avoid. This of course resulted in a landslide of curiosity. Maybe it shouldn't have been so unexpected. To such a small town at the edge of the world, San Diego was positively exotic. He found himself answering millions of ridiculous questions. James introduced him to Josh, the Captain of the hockey team, which was apparently just as important as football, if not more. Josh, in turn, paraded him in front of the entire cheerleading team like a fancy new accessory and the girls swooned. It was like being propelled into an alternate universe. They ate up the motorcycle accident story so fast that Mark was left feeling unsettled. He refused the half a dozen invitations to parties and other 'events' happening that weekend. It would take him two days just to digest the craziness.

He spent the weekend working on the car. On the far side of the three car garage, his father occupied himself with body work on a '65 ElCamino. They didn't talk much about anything and Mark was forced to admit that he enjoyed the companionable silence of working side by side with someone. He was able to sit quietly in the corner and smoke his cigarette without his mother's restless chatter or her never ending complaints about the smoke.

She called Sunday afternoon as soon as she came home from the church. She asked if he'd gone to church too, as if moving across the country was somehow supposed to make him believe in God. She wanted to know if he'd changed his mind about staying in Sandy Neck. It was a long, uncomfortable conversation, reminding him all over again why he left San Diego in the first place. By the time he finally managed to hang up the phone the sun was about to go down and he had a beginning of a faint headache. He also appreciated his father's silences in a whole new way.

Monday morning he rolled into the parking lot in a 1966 Ford Falcon. He was pretty pleased with himself. He'd paid a ridiculously low price for the partially restored relic which had looked like it needed months of work. He supposed that in some way, it was sort of depressing, the fact that he'd had so much time on his hands to get it done in four weeks. Yet, the car had turned out to be in a much better condition than the seller was aware of. The longest part of the process had turned out to be the wait for another engine. When it had arrived, he'd found himself grateful for his father's presence all over again. Replacing the engine was not the sort of work he felt comfortable doing by himself.

He was surrounded before he even managed to get out of the car. There was no chance of making it through the ring of people until he committed himself to driving three girls home. One of them, a pretty little thing with red hair, called shotgun and the other two looked ready to murder her. Crazy. He'd only been in the parking lot for five minutes before he thoroughly regretted not buying a nondescript Chevy truck instead.

Josh stuck to him all the way into the school, trying to talk to him into a double date with his girlfriend Rose and her sister. Mark put up with it until the first bell sounded and the halls started clearing, then he decided that he'd had quite enough for one day.

Stopping in the rapidly emptying hall, he turned to Josh,

"I'm not gonna go out with your girlfriend's sister."

"Why not? She's smokin' hot."

"Dude. I'm gay."

The shock on the kid's face was oddly satisfying. The last lecture his old shrink drilled into him threatened to float up and Mark pushed it down mercilessly. He wasn't sabotaging himself. Maybe he did have a tendency to do that sometimes but this wasn't one of those times. He just wasn't about to lie. He owed himself some honesty.

"You're kidding, right?" Josh said finally, his lips curving as if ready to pronounce it the best joke ever.

"Nope. Sorry. You don't have to worry though. You're not exactly my type."

Josh flushed faintly, letting Mark know that he'd hit the nail on the head. What was it with straight guys and this ridiculous notion that every gay man must instantly be attracted to them? Did none of them realize how arrogant that appeared?

"That's a relief," Josh said, "Cause I'm straight."

"No shit. Like I couldn't tell that a mile off."

The kid's relieved smile was cut off by the second bell, warning them both that they were late.

"Hey, I'll see you at lunch, ok?" Josh said quickly and sprinted off.

Mark shook his head. He doubted that very much. If his past experiences were anything to go by, he'd never speak to Josh again. The thought was oddly comforting. By the end of the day the word would spread and Mark would finally get some peace and quiet.

He was wrong about one thing.

The word definitely did spread but he was to have no solitude. He wasn't sure what possessed him to go into the cafeteria during lunch, unless it was to first hand experience his own descent from a celebrity to an outcast. No such luck. Josh's girlfriend Rose was waiting by the cafeteria doors. She literally dragged him over to 'her' table, refusing to relinquish his sleeve for any reason. She even sent someone to get him a tray when he professed to actually being hungry. He ended up sandwiched between her and her sister Lily, across the table from Josh who had by then completely gotten over the fact that Mark was gay. He started grilling Mark on the Falcon, wanting to know what its top speed was and how fast it could go from zero to sixty. On one side of him, Lily wanted to know how many boys he'd dated back home. Did he leave someone behind? Because that was so romantic. Rose was trying to convince him that the double date was still a go because she had this friend at the Tech school who was adorable and Mark would just 'love' him. Mark concluded that they were all crazy. In the end, he agreed to the double date for a Saturday, two weeks away, just to get Rose off his back.

After school he still drove the three girls home. The fact that he was gay didn't put them off either and he was forced to answer another pile of senseless questions. By the time he was finally alone he was worn out, feeling like he'd spent the entire day being beat about the head with pillows.

By the end of that second week he had met and spoken to every single person at the goddamned school except for one. Nick had yet to even meet his eyes.

On Friday he made a stunning discovery. There were two of them, a mirror image, a boy and a girl. Both pale, blonde and blue eyed, with similar lanky builds and eerily similar faces. The girl seemed more confident of the two, if either one of them could be called confident. They both had a habit of moving quickly and sticking close to the walls. Seeing them together was startling. Where Nick was pretty, his twin was beautiful, her hair much longer, her posture delicate, her step a graceful glide of a dancer.

Yet, the following week, Nick was the one who caught his eye more often. The kid never spoke to anyone. He had yet to see either of the twins communicate, even with each other. The people walked around them without acknowledging their presence, their eyes sliding off as if the twins were something unpleasant. He caught himself staring at Nick during the class, noticing the length of his fingers, the surprisingly fragile curve of his collar bones, the long, pale eyelashes.

By the time the next Friday rolled around again he was almost grateful for the blind date. Nick was turning into somewhat of an obsession for him and it needed to stop.

The movie turned out to be only passable. Rose had picked the most popular chick flick and Josh never even put up a fight. They were too busy making out to watch it anyway. Mark's date was nice enough; pretty in a sort of an

exotic way, with dark eyes and a ready smile. He was carefree and easy to talk to. That about summed it up. Seth reminded him too much of the boys he'd dated back in California, all fun and no depth. He tried to give the kid the benefit of the doubt but by the end of the movie they had nothing left to talk about.

Afterwards, Rose wanted to go to a chicken wing place at the other side of town. Mark agreed just to put off the inevitable drive home where he would doubtlessly promise to call Seth even though he had no intention of doing any such thing.

The chicken wing joint had a small bar crowd and mostly empty tables. The sat down, ordered their food, and everything was going well until the appetizers showed up.

Mark was in the process of cutting into a piece of buffalo chicken when a dull crash came from the other side of the table.

"Oh," Rose said, "I'm so clumsy."

Her bowl of chowder was on the floor, the ceramic shattered into millions of pieces. For a moment Mark thought himself a character in a bad play; not one single person at the table looked the way they should. The waitress rushed over and Rose was instantly all apologies, sounding genuinely upset. The waitress left to get another bowl of chowder and a bus boy showed up to clean the mess. That was when it all became clear.

The bus boy was Nick.

He didn't even glance at the table, hiding behind his hair and cleaning quickly, as if to get it over with as soon as possible.

When he was almost done, Rose pointed under the table,

"You missed a piece."

Without looking up, Nick bent over to get it and Rose, in one smooth motion, dumped an entire cup of ice and soda on his head.

Seth burst out laughing. Josh shook his head and rolled his eyes but he was grinning too. Nick straightened up, soaked to the skin and walked away without a word. In no time he was replaced by another bus boy. No one came to the table to complain even though Mark was pretty sure that at least one of the waitresses had seen the entire thing.

"What was that all about?" he asked, wondering if the shock he felt showed in his voice.

"Just a little fun," Rose said, sneaking a french fry off Seth's plate.

"Who was he?"

"Palovski. Nick Palovski," Josh said, "I keep forgetting you don't know this shit. His dad owned most of the property around the town. Used to employ half the town too."

"Used to?"

"Drove into a school bus four years ago," Rose said, "Liked his drink a little too much. Got himself killed along with seven kids."

"And here's the fun part," Josh said around a mouthful of potato skins, "turns out all the properties were mortgaged to the hilt and old Palovski didn't have a penny in his pocket. People lost their jobs, their homes."

"The whole town went to shit," Rose said absently.

"Some people think that the wife is hiding the money," Seth cut in.

Josh shook his head,

“That’s bull. Did you see where they live? There’s no way she’s sitting on those millions, she would have skipped town long ago. Anyone would.”

“So where’d the money go?” Seth countered and Josh shrugged like he didn’t know or care.

Rose leaned forward,

“I don’t know about the money but the twins are definitely not right. Attached to the hip like that, they’re creepy.”

“My mom used to work with their mom,” Seth leaned forward too, “and she heard that the two of them still sleep together.”

“That’s fucked up,” Josh grimaced.

“That’s nothing,” Rose hissed, “one of the girls that went to ballet lessons with Noelle says that they were always touching each other. She thinks they... you know, with each other.”

“Ewww,” Seth shuddered, “that’s fucking gross.”

“Really Rose,” Josh made a face, “I’m trying to eat.”

“I’m sorry baby.”

Mark agreed. He’d heard quite enough.

Chapter 2

When Nick finally got home at half past ten, his shirt was so stiff it could stand up by itself. Noelle took one look at him and covered her mouth with her hands.

“Oh, Nick.”

“I’m going to shower,” he said shortly and closed himself in the bathroom.

Under the stream of hot water he finally let go and his face crumpled. He sobbed once, silently, then bit his hand to make it stop. Scrubbed the soda off his skin and out of his hair. He told himself it didn’t matter.

Life went on. He ignored the little voice in the back of his head that warned him just how close he was to breaking. How much harder it was becoming to get out of bed each morning, how every time he closed his eyes he could see the prescription bottle of Vicodin in the medicine cabinet.

Dressing quickly he went back out into the living room. Their home, which could only be called that in the loosest sense of the word, was a shoebox sized trailer. It had a combination kitchen and living room, one bedroom and a bathroom barely large enough to turn around in. Mom worked insane sixteen hour shifts from three in the afternoon until seven in the morning. The bedroom was hers because all she did at home was sleep. Sometimes weeks would go by where they wouldn’t even see her in passing.

Nick and Noelle slept on cots in the living room. The same place where they ate, studied and once in a while watched the small black and white TV which only managed to pick up three channels on a good day.

The TV was off now, Noelle waiting curled up on his cot.

“Who was it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. It does.”

He shoved his dirty clothes in a hamper by the bathroom door.

“Rose.”

“Who was with her?”

“Josh. Seth O’Conner and Mark.”

His throat tightened and he swallowed heavily, hiding his face by digging through the second hamper for a clean pair of socks. Why did that bother him so much? He knew nothing about Mark. Except that Mark’s gaze had followed him constantly for the past week. Each time he could feel it on his skin like a physical touch. It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time; he hadn’t known what to make of it.

Now he knew.

“Mark? Mark who?”

“The new kid.”

“Oh, so it’s true! He is gay,” she smirked, “Marty and Sam Russo had a bet going which one would sleep with him first. The whole history class put money down on one or the other. I guess they both lose.”

“Do we have to talk about this?” he snapped.

Her smirk slipped.

He took a deep breath, not wanting to be mad at her, his twin, his only friend.

“I just wanna go to sleep,” he said.

She got up and crawled onto her own cot without a word.

Much later when the lights were off and his mind was still refusing to let him rest, she whispered across the room, “I’m sorry.”

Mark spent most of Sunday cruising the internet. The entire story was there for anyone to read, piles of articles about Mr. Palovski’s business, life and death. Josh and Rose had the condensed version of the accident. Mr. Palovski was indeed drunk when he barreled into the school bus a seventy five miles per hour. He’d had an open and mostly empty bottle of Jack Daniels in the cab of his 1935 Ford truck. There was no fiber glass or plastic on that baby, just good old metal and steel. It might have even saved his life except that the original 1935 glass had not been shatterproof and a chunk of it had nearly decapitated him. The truck had slammed into the bus pushing it sideways into a telephone pole which then broke and landed on the bus, killing the kid in the window seat closest to the impact. A van coming from the other direction did not stop in time. It had slammed into the bus too, spinning it again. The woman who had been driving the van was not wearing her seat belt. She was dead on impact. Her two kids, strapped securely in the back, survived.

All in all the accident resulted in ten deaths; seven kids, the soccer mom, the bus driver and Mr. Palovski. Most of the kids from the bus came away injured; a few had to be air lifted to the nearest brain trauma center. Two would live their lives strapped into wheelchairs.

Later on, during the court proceedings, the will turned out not to be worth the paper it was written on. There was no money. Just debt, a pile of loans on top of more loans, the total amounting to millions of dollars. Dozens of accounts

in Mr. Palovski's name, all empty. The money had been withdrawn from all of them little by little over a period of two years. The speculation went on for dozens pages that Mark didn't bother to read. According to the reporters, who were by then calling the entire incident a 'murder-suicide', the business had been running on fumes for months before the accident. The entire thing collapsed.

Mrs. Palovski managed to escape some charges but not all of them. She avoided jail by a sheer stroke of luck, but still ended up with a pile of fines she would spend her life paying off. There were pictures posted of her, a pretty, pale woman, her face chiseled out of marble. Next to her stood the twelve year old twins, like two peas in a pod, looking equally afraid and lost.

Mark shut the computer off.

His dad was out in the garage as always, this time working on his own truck. He was replacing the air filter as the oil was pouring into a pan underneath the engine. Without a word, Mark checked the antifreeze and added some more.

"Did you check the transmission fluid?" he asked.

"Not yet. The tires need air though."

Mark grabbed the compressor and filled the tires. Then he sat down on the floor, lit a cigarette and watched the oil drip out.

"What do you know about the Palovski accident?"

His dad settled down on a milk crate,

"Probably as much as anyone else. Why?"

"Just thought you might have worked on that truck."

"No. He'd had it long before I moved here."

"I've got the kid in one of my classes."

"Palovski's kid? Wasn't there two of them?"

"Yeah. Twins. Boy and a girl."

"You got the boy in one of your classes?"

"Yup," Mark inhaled deeply, the smoke curling around his face.

"What's his name?"

"Nick."

In the short silence they watched the last of the oil make it into the pan. Mark put out his cigarette, grabbed the new oil filter and crawled under the truck. He carefully pushed the oil pan out of the way until his dad could grab it and pull it out.

"What's the kid like?" his dad asked.

Mark paused what he was doing.

"Quiet," he said finally, then decided that wasn't enough, "Pretty."

"Ah."

His dad said nothing as Mark crawled back out and started pouring oil back in. After screwing the oil cap back on he checked the brake fluid, then walked around to the driver's side to turn the truck on so he could check the transmission fluid.

"It doesn't look like you need any."

"Good. That family's had a hell of a time since the accident."

"I've noticed. The other night-- the people I went out with--" he shook his head, not wanting to get into it, "Let's just say I had a part in something I'm not proud of."

He shut the hood,

"Were you gonna wash it?"

"No. It'll just be dirty again by tomorrow night. So your date didn't go well?"

"No. I don't think I wanna see any of those people again. Are you sure you don't want it washed? I don't mind doing it."

"Don't bother. It's almost supper time anyway. Pizza?"

"Sure. I think I wanna ask him out."

"The Palovski kid?"

"Yeah."

His dad wiped his hands on a towel and passed it to Mark,

"Because you feel guilty?"

"Yes. No. I mean, sure, I feel guilty but that's not why. I need to apologize first and then I guess I'll see what happens."

"It'll definitely make your last year of school interesting."

Monday he attempted to corner Nick. It was like chasing a snake in the tall grass. He would catch glimpses of him in the hallways but when he tried to follow, Nick would disappear. By the last class of the day, Mark was beginning to wonder if there was an entirely different maze of hallways somewhere that he wasn't aware of. When the last bell rang Nick was the first person out of the classroom and even though Mark exited only moments behind him, Nick had managed to disappear again. He stood outside until all the buses pulled away and the parking lots gaped empty but neither of the twins showed up.

Did someone pick them up? Were they still inside the school?

The next day he tried a different tactic. He lurked around the cafeteria during all the lunch periods, skipping two of his classes to do it, figuring that at least one of them had to eat sometimes. By the third lunch period the wait paid off. The girl came out alone, a few minutes ahead of everyone else.

"Hey," he said.

She looked right through him and kept on walking.

"Hey, wait."

By the time he caught up with her they were almost at the front office.

"Wait! You're Nick's sister right? I'm Mark, I just moved here from--"

"I know who you are," she said, not bothering to slow down, "What do you want?"

"I wanna talk to your brother."

"You've done enough."

"Slow down ok, I just wanna apologize."

She stopped and spun towards him so fast that his feet tangled. Now that he could actually see her face, her fury made him take another step back.

"That's nice," she said coldly, "An apology will make it all better, won't it?"

"No," he said, suddenly feeling stupid, "Of course it won't."

"That's right. It won't. So why don't you take your apology, Mark from wherever, and shove it up your ass."

Since he'd already missed half of his classes, he didn't bother going to the last one. Instead, he found a spot outside the school where he could keep an eye on all the exits and settled in to wait.

Maybe he was crazy. Maybe he should just let it go. Apologizing isn't going to change what happened, but he couldn't stand the thought of Nick grouping him together with Rose and the rest of them. He thought of and discarded a dozen different apologies in the next two hours. When the school finally emptied out and he was sure that the twins must still be in the building somewhere, he went back in and started his search. He still didn't know what he would say when finally faced with Nick. He would just have to fly by the seat of his pants as he always did.

In the end, he went into the auditorium by chance, hoping to cut across the school to the math wing without having to go all the way around. The auditorium was dark, all the lights were off except for the two bulbs focused on the stage. Mark found himself at the very top, in the pitch black, the rows of red seats spreading down underneath him. Illuminated by the light, Nick sat behind the piano in one corner of the stage, his fingers dancing over the keys. Mark's throat dried.

It was Chopin's Waltz in C Minor and Mark knew it well. He'd heard his mother play it more times than he could count, but he'd never heard it played like this. It had been a cheerful piece of music, hadn't it? There was nothing cheerful about Nick's version. It wept and it ached, it was angry one moment and sinking into the darkness in the next. It blindsided Mark so completely that he just stood there, unmoving, forgetting where he was going or why. Nick rocked slightly as he played, his hands drawing out the notes with ease. Nick, whose dad killed seven kids and cost the town millions of dollars. Nick, who never looked anyone in the eye.

Only when the piece ended did Mark notice the girl sitting on the other side of the stage, her school books spread around her.

"Fantasie Impromptu," she said.

Mark sat down slowly as Nick went on to play one of Chopin's most difficult pieces. Then another, and another. He sat in the same spot, enthralled, the music washing over him, taking him half-remembered places, memories so faint they resembled dreams. This had been the music of his childhood: Chopin, Bach, Tchaikovsky. He'd known every note the way other children knew Sesame Street. When was the last time he'd actually listened any of it? When was the last time he'd really heard the beauty of the notes? Years. It had been years.

When Nick moved away from the piano and the girl started gathering up her books, Mark slipped out of the auditorium silently, like a thief. Blinking at the sudden brightness he took a deep, unsteady breath, feeling out of place. The world around him, washed in fall sunshine, had never seemed so drab before.

The next day he snuck into the auditorium again. Huddling in the dark he listened to Nick play Brahms Intermezzo in B Flat, Ballad in B, watched him moving from one to the next without any prompts from the girl. Saw him shift from melancholy to angry, starting with Mussorgsky's Gnomus and moving quickly through Bydlo and The Little Hut, skipping all the Promenades which would have eased the fury of the pieces. He ended with Cum Mortuis In Lingua Mortua, giving it the sort of resigned air that Mussorgsky himself had never accomplished and probably never even had in mind when he composed the piece.

The day after that he found Nick alone. He barely noticed the girl's absence. Nick was playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. By the end of it Mark's heart was beating like crazy, his throat filling with despair. It was a piece that could make the stones weep; Nick played each note with desperate familiarity. It was beautiful and heartbreaking, it was unlike anything Mark had ever heard before.

Nick paused after he was done, the last note lingering in silence. Mark ached to show himself, to reach out to him. He had no idea what he would say, what he could do to combat so much darkness. Nick's hands hesitated over the keys, then broke into a furious version of the Turkish March. The shift was so stark, so unexpected that Mark felt like someone kicked him in the stomach. The door next to him opened, momentarily bathing him in light. He froze. The door closed and Mark snuck a quick look at the stage where the music went on uninterrupted. Nick hadn't seen him but the girl most definitely did. She stood above him, her eyes unreadable in the gloom, her face expressionless. Panic seized him; he opened his mouth to apologize and closed it without making a sound. They both knew how she felt about apologies. He looked down at Nick again feeling despair. This wasn't how he'd wanted to talk to Nick for the first time, after being exposed as a stalker.

She walked past him and down the stairs. Mark held his breath, waiting for her to say something. She climbed the stage, settled in her usual spot and started doing her homework. After a few minutes, when it became clear that she would not give him away and Mark could breathe again, he got up quietly and snuck out, determined not to bother them again.

But the next day, he was back in the same spot.

Chapter 3

During the week, the school would sometimes stay crowded well past three o'clock. Sports practices, detentions, club meetings, they all happened after the school day was officially over. Fridays, the school emptied out completely within the fifteen minutes of the last bell. Two lonely book keepers in the front office were the only ones keeping the doors unlocked until five in the afternoon. Other than their presence, Nick and Noelle had the school to themselves. Only on Fridays, when there was no chance of interruptions, Noelle would strap on her ballet slippers and practice turns on the stage. She had been at the top of her ballet class when their world fell apart. Afterwards, there had been

no more money for ballet. Nick bought her a new pair of slippers every time she wore out the old pair, working extra hours without their mom's knowledge to pay for them. He wished he could quit school and work full time so she could keep dancing. He wished for many things that would never come true.

It was nearing four o'clock and Noelle had already packed to go when a door slammed somewhere beyond the curtain. The sound was so strange and unexpected that they both froze. Something heavy crashed to the ground and laughter echoed through the auditorium. Noelle was immediately rushing off the stage, Nick right behind her. They were a foot away from the side exit when they were spotted.

"Hey! It's the twins!"

Noelle bolted through the door just as the second voice joined the first,

"Get them!"

Momentarily blind after the darkness of the auditorium, Nick let Noelle pull him to the left.

"The front office," she hissed.

They ran.

For a minute or so he actually thought that they were going to make it. They were both quick on their feet; the benefit of walking to and from school every day. In the end, they only made it as far as the first row of senior lockers, two hallways away from the front entrance. It could have been light years.

Something slammed against Nick's legs and he went down hard, the impact knocking the breath out of him. Noelle stopped to help and the chase was over.

There were two of them; one of them had thrown his backpack at Nick's legs. Tim Mason. His little sister Tessie had been on the bus and heading to school when Nick's dad took his little joy ride. She'd been sitting in the coveted rear seat of the bus, and along with two other girls, received the brunt of the impact. At seven year old Tessie's wake, the casket had remained shut.

The other chaser was Tim's right hand man, John Turner. Both of his parents used to work for Nick's dad. Both of them had lost their jobs. Mrs. Turner ran off to San Francisco two years ago with Dr. Franklin, the local dentist. Mr. Turner lived off welfare and drank too much.

Nick and Noelle had no chance in hell.

He got to his feet and Noelle was yanked from his side.

"Let her go," he said calmly.

Tim shoved him. Nick stumbled back into the lockers awkwardly, almost falling down again.

"Or what?"

"Nothing," Nick said, watching Noelle struggle in John's arms, "You don't need us both. Just let her go."

Tim laughed and shoved him again. Nick's shoulder blade connected with the locker hinge and his entire arm turned numb.

"Nope. I think we'll have more fun this way. Right John?"

John snickered. Noelle tried to kick him but he stepped out of the way, snatching a handful of her hair and shaking her like a rag doll.

"Stop that," he said, as if talking to a dog, "We're just having fun."

“Please let her go,” Nick said again, trying to stay calm, trying not to show how afraid he really was.

They’d never been cornered like this before. Sure, they’ve both been picked on plenty of times in the past. He’d gotten beaten up and Noelle had gotten into a hair pulling contest with a few girls, but there had always been an adult around to put a stop to it. This time there was no one. Afraid didn’t even come close. Nick was terrified. Tim shoved him again, harder this time, and Nick’s head bounced off the lockers, millions of sparks exploding in front of his eyes.

“Wait dude,” John laughed, “he asked so politely.”

“You’re right,” Tim turned to Nick again, “I’ll tell you what, I’ll consider it. What are you gonna do for me?”

Nick glanced at Noelle again, admiring her marble face, so like their mother’s, never showing an ounce of fear. She was furious; that was Noelle’s answer to everything. She was too angry to be afraid.

“Tell him to go fuck himself,” she said and John shook her again.

She winced in pain but she did not make a sound nor did she look any less angry. Red marks stood out on her upper arm where John’s fingers had dug into the skin.

Nick felt bile climb up his throat.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked softly.

Noelle hissed.

Tim laughed,

“Now we’re talking. Get down on your knees.”

Swallowing the bile down, Nick did what he was told. He’d only managed to get down on one knee when Tim kicked him in the stomach. He fell the rest of the way down. Air left him in a rush, nausea flooded him.

He gasped for air and heard Tim say,

“Not fast enough sunshine.”

“Stop it,” Noelle’s voice shook with fury, “leave him alone.”

Nick straightened back to his knees, still feeling like he couldn’t get enough air when Tim punched him, the fist landing on Nick’s cheekbone. A flash of pain large enough to block out the world.

“That’s enough.”

Nick’s eyes watered; he couldn’t look up. Blood dripped from his face and on to the gray floor tiles. He wiped his nose and his hand came away crimson.

That voice was familiar.

“Let them go.”

“This is none of your business. Keep moving.”

Nick looked up and his stomach tightened. He wanted to hide. He wished he was dead.

Mark dropped his bag on the floor,

“You’re wrong,” he said lightly, “this is my business.”

Tim seemed more surprised than anything else,

“What do you think you’re gonna do?”

Mark shrugged and stuck his hands in his jacket pockets, looking perfectly relaxed,

“Whatever it takes I guess. Or you can just let them go and walk away. That would be the easiest thing all around.”
For a few seconds Tim looked like he was actually considering it.

The rest happened almost too fast to see. Tim rushed at Mark, Mark’s hands came out of his pockets. Something glinted in his hand and there was a sickening crunch. In the next moment Tim was on the ground, covering his face, blood seeping through his fingers.

“Jesus,” he gurgled, “Fuck.”

Suddenly, John looked uneasy. He wasted no time in unhanding Noelle. She rushed to Nick, helping him up, wrapping her arms around him as if she was going to protect him.

Mark still stood in the same spot, not having moved an inch. Armed with nothing more than a set of brass knuckles, he motioned to John.

“You next?”

John held his hands up,

“Nope. You’re right, we’re all done here.”

“Good. Take your friend and get lost.”

John grabbed Tim’s jacket and tried to stand him up. Mark circled them until his back was to Nick and Noelle, hiding them from the view.

“One more thing,” he said, “You touch them again and I’ll fucking kill you.”

John twitched. He jerked Tim up, paying no mind to his pained sounds and dragged him down the hall. They left a trail of blood from Tim’s broken nose.

Only then Mark’s hands started shaking.

Noelle looked disheveled and shaken but unhurt. She held on to Nick tightly, her face pale, her eyes studying Mark as if seeing him for the first time.

There was a trickle of blood still flowing from Nick’s nose, some of it smeared across his face, some of it staining his shirt. The entire left side of his face was red and already starting to bruise. His gaze was locked somewhere below Mark’s knees.

“Are you ok?” Mark asked, surprised to hear that his own voice was unsteady.

“Yeah,” Nick said quietly, “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry about the restaurant,” Mark said, then felt stupid.

His timing was immaculate as always.

Nick just nodded jerkily, refusing to meet his eyes. They stood there in silence as seconds ticked by. As his fist had connected with that asshole’s face Mark had felt high; he’d felt like a hero. He didn’t feel like that any more. He felt inept and miserable.

“Do you wanna ride home?”

Nick shook his head quickly but Noelle was the one who spoke,

“No, we’re ok. Thank you. And sorry about the stuff I said. Before.”

Mark shrugged awkwardly, “It’s ok. I deserved it.”

He grabbed his bag and slipped his knuckles back in his pocket.

"Ok," he said, feeling dumber by the moment, "I'll see you around then."

And he walked away.

By the time he pulled into the driveway, his hands had finally stopped shaking. He walked into the kitchen, noticing that the door to the garage gaped open.

"Mark?"

"Yup."

He threw his keys on the table and stepped out into the garage. His dad sat on the milk crate, facing a skeleton of a '77 Chevy Malibu that was missing tires, most of its glass and a hood. Mark's eyebrows went up at the sight of the original engine which looked cleaner than it had any right to be.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. Maybe a project, maybe just parts."

"That engine good?"

"Yeah. Hundred and thirty on it."

"Impressive."

Mark settled on a different crate and lit a cigarette. There was some rust on the car but not a lot. Most of the original mint paint still held on. He loved the four square headlights. But was it worth the cost and the work?

"I broke someone's nose today."

"Who was it?"

Mark shrugged,

"Don't know. Didn't ask his name."

"Why?"

"He hit Nick so I hit him."

His dad stretched out his legs and the knees popped loudly in the silence,

"What happened?"

"Found two guys using the twins as punching bags. Put a stop to it."

"What'd you do to the other one?"

"Nothing. He was a coward."

Mark put out his cigarette; his hands were shaking again. He should have broken the other kid's nose too. Should have beaten them both until they fucking cried.

"Are cops gonna be looking for you?"

Mark bit his lip. He hadn't thought of that.

"I don't know. Maybe."

He felt guilty for the first time. What if he got arrested? Expelled? He hadn't lived with his dad for two months and was already getting into trouble. His mother would have a field day.

"Sorry," he said.

“What for? Punching someone who deserved it?”

“No.”

“Good,” his dad stood up and leaned on the front of the Malibu, gaze locked on the engine.

“I don’t like to fight,” Mark added.

“And you shouldn’t like it. I guess you didn’t get a chance to ask Nick out.”

Mark smiled,

“No, not yet. I will.”

Nick didn’t want to talk.

He was silent the entire walk home. The silence continued while he washed his face and soaked a tee shirt with cold water to press against his cheek. Then he curled up on his cot, wishing he could stop thinking.

He should be grateful that Mark showed up when he did. Noelle came out of it all without a scratch and that should be what really mattered.

Instead he wished that Tim had killed him. Why not? What the hell was he living for? He was worthless. He couldn’t protect himself, he couldn’t protect Noelle, he didn’t even try. He’d been on his knees, terrified, ready to do whatever Tim demanded. He was pathetic. And Mark had shown up like some hero from a story, a knight coming to their rescue. Afterwards, Nick had expected pity but there hadn’t been any. Mark had seemed concerned instead; almost awkwardly so.

“Do you want me to call Bob’s?” Noelle asked, her voice careful.

“No. I’ll start getting ready in a minute.”

“You can’t go to work like that.”

“They’ll keep me in the back. I’ll be fine. Why-- what were you apologizing for? To Mark. When did you talk to him?”

She huddled on her cot, pretending she wasn’t watching him, pretending she wasn’t worried.

“Tuesday. He came up to me and said he wanted to talk to you. Wanted to apologize.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shrugged,

“I was still mad. I told him to take his apology and shove it up his ass.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said tiredly.

It didn’t matter anyway.

“He’s been sitting in the auditorium, listening to you play.”

A thousand miles away, Nick thought he must have misheard her,

“What?”

“Mark. He’s been sneaking in through the sound entrance and sitting next to the top balcony. I think-- he was probably there when Tim and John showed up.”

Nick sat up slowly, the pain forgotten,

“How do you know?”

"I saw him yesterday. I almost tripped over him. And I thought I saw something move up there the day before that but I didn't think anything of it."

Mark had been sitting in the auditorium and listening to him play. He was there when Nick and Noelle were chased out. He didn't run into them by mistake, he came after them for the sole purpose of making sure they were ok. And Noelle had said nothing.

"Why would you keep that from me?" he asked, realizing that he was finally angry.

She shrugged again without meeting his eyes,

"I don't know. I don't think he wanted you to know he was listening. I just thought-- I thought maybe he had a crush on you. The way he looks as you--"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he snapped, getting up.

How fucking cruel was that? To find out that all along Mark had been the good guy, trying to find Nick and apologize, sneaking into the auditorium to hear Nick play. A crush? After seeing Nick utterly fucking humiliated? After seeing him on his knees for Tim Mason? Even if there had been a chance in hell that Mark found anything about Nick attractive, what he witnessed would have surely ruined it.

"I can't believe you fucking knew he was there and you didn't tell me."

"Why?" she snapped, getting angry herself, "Why would I tell you? The minute you found out, you would have stopped playing and ran."

And she was right. That's exactly what he would have done. Because he was a fucking coward and now Mark knew it too.

Without another word, Nick walked out.

Chapter 4

Monday, Mark was patiently waiting outside the cafeteria when Noelle came out. This time she stopped when she saw him, guilt flashing across her features.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi."

"I thought maybe you wouldn't yell at me this time."

She smiled sheepishly,

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Don't be. I definitely deserved it."

People started trickling out of the cafeteria, every set of eyes widening at the sight of Mark and Noelle standing together.

Noelle ignored them.

"Well... thanks again. For coming to the rescue."

"Let me walk you to your next class."

She studied him for a long moment, her gaze considering.

“Yeah,” she said finally, “Ok.”

They hadn’t gone two steps before he blurted out,

“Is Nick ok?”

All morning Mark had been hoping to catch a glimpse of him in the hallways with no luck. He concluded that Nick must have stayed home, which made him feel worse than he already did. How badly was the kid actually hurt?

“Black and blue,” she said, watching him out of the corner of her eye and no doubt noticing that Mark was blushing. He didn’t blush very often, but when he did it was hard to miss.

“He’s here,” she said, “just a little more careful than usual. You guys have a class together, right?”

“Yeah. Latin.”

“You’ll see him there.”

“Good. Thank you for not telling him I was there. In the auditorium. I was afraid that he wouldn’t play if he knew.”

“He wouldn’t, he doesn’t play for people any more. He knows now, I told him.”

“Is he mad at me?”

She snorted,

“Mad at you? No. He’s mad at me for not telling him.”

“Sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. We won’t be staying any more. He says it’s not safe.”

“Do you have a piano at home?”

She shook her head.

“So... he’s just gonna stop playing?”

She shrugged.

That seemed like a crime. It made him angry all over again.

They stopped in front of her classroom where even the teacher did a double-take after seeing them together.

“Listen, if you guys aren’t staying after any more, let me drive you home.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to.”

She shook her head,

“It’ll just make trouble for you.”

“I don’t care.”

“You might care later on.”

“Or I might not. Give me a chance, huh?”

She bit her lip,

“Nick’s gonna be mad.”

“He’s already mad right? Tell him you hired me as a body guard.”

She laughed. The bell rang.

“Ok,” she said quickly, “wait in the lobby, we’ll meet you there.”

He waited in the lobby for an hour.

The parking lot was empty and the school silent as a tomb. By then, he was sure that they were either gone or avoiding him; still, he couldn't make himself leave. Couple of times his feet tried to take him back to the auditorium even though he knew that they wouldn't be there.

He would wait until four o'clock.

For whatever reason, the twins never stayed past the late bus departure although they never actually took the bus, leaving on foot instead. So he would wait until four o'clock. Another hour.

It was clear to him that this had become an obsession. He hadn't been this infatuated with someone since his first crush, and that one had ended in a disaster. This was likely to end in a disaster too. For all Mark knew, Nick could be straight. Even if he was gay, he could very likely be completely uninterested. Mark knew his own limitations well. He wasn't an honor roll student, not by a long shot. He loved music, but had no great talent for it, not like Nick did. He could objectively say that he wasn't the worst looking guy out there; at the very least, his body was in decent shape. Years of working on cars had kept his muscles busy. His face... there was nothing he could do about his face. He'd spent years trying to get used to his own reflection in the mirror. It was not as bad as it could have been, not as bad as he sometimes saw it when his mind took him through dark and sleepless places.

But Nick-- Nick was beautiful.

Anywhere outside of this fucked up little town, Nick would have been out of his league. The twins had been born into a different class of the society; that was becoming more clear the more he knew about them. All the money in the world could not change the fact that Mark had been born a mechanic's son. Despite the fact that his dad had done very well for himself, Mark had never aspired to anything better than being a good mechanic. His hands would always be rough, the car grease permanently embedded under his fingernails. It was a cruel game of chance that had made Mark rich and Nick poor.

A joke.

He'd almost convinced himself that they weren't going to show when they suddenly appeared from a dead end hallway, looking as if they'd been arguing.

Nick saw him and stopped, the surprise on his face obvious. Noelle, on the other hand, did not look in the least bit surprised.

"You're still here," she said, sounding pleased.

"Yeah. I can go though, if you've changed your mind."

"No, no," she said quickly, "we were just running late. Sorry to make you wait."

She shot a quick glance at Nick, making it obvious that the delay was his fault. Nick met Mark's eyes only for a moment, faint color staining the uninjured cheek. Then he looked away again.

Mark's stomach clenched. Around the edges, the bruise was starting to fade away to green but the cheekbone itself was still purple and swollen. It looked angry and painful and yet Nick was no less beautiful for it. Beautiful and obviously uncomfortable. Mark had a distinct impression that he was forcing himself somewhere where he wasn't wanted.

"I haven't been waiting long," he said and then realized that it was a lie and they knew it.

“I mean-- it didn’t seem that long. I guess I got used to staying late--“ there he cut off, feeling stupid.

The fact that he’d been hiding in the auditorium for the past week like some psycho stalker was not something he’d wanted to bring up. What was it about Nick that made it impossible for Mark to open his mouth without sticking his foot in it?

Noelle just smiled,

“So you wouldn’t mind waiting until four o’clock?”

“No, not at all,” he said quickly.

Would he get a chance to hear Nick play again?

Nick glared at Noelle and finally spoke,

“We’re not staying.”

She shrugged,

“Fine. Then I guess we’re ready to go.”

Nick got in the back and left the passenger side to Noelle. She told Mark to head downtown and nothing else was said for a while.

Mark wondered if Nick got into the back seat to eliminate any possibility of conversation. He’d tucked himself so far in the corner that Mark couldn’t see him in the review mirror.

The whole thing was ridiculous. The kid didn’t like him.

Noelle broke the silence,

“So, you’re from San Diego?”

“Yeah. No. I’m originally from North Carolina. I’ve been living in San Diego since I was twelve.”

“How did you end up here?”

“My stepdad is a military guy. He got relocated to Germany so I came to live with my dad for a while.”

“You didn’t want to go to Germany? I hear it’s very pretty.”

“Don’t speak German. That would have made it kind of hard.”

“Oh,” she said, “we speak German.”

“You do?” he automatically glanced in the review mirror but Nick was nowhere to be seen.

“Yeah. French and Russian too. Nick’s working on his Latin but I think four is enough for me.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

Nick played the piano and spoke five languages. Mark wished he didn’t feel like the void between them just got a little wider.

Another few minutes were spent in silence then Noelle told him to take Route 131 instead of Route 28.

“This is a nice car,” she added.

“Thanks.”

“It looks expensive.”

“It’s not. Well, it wasn’t when I got it. I had to spend some time putting it back together.”

She turned the volume up on the radio and Vivaldi came through the speakers.

Her eyebrows went up,

“You listen to classical music? You don’t exactly strike me as the type.”

Nick shifted in the back. Mark told himself he wouldn’t get offended.

“I like ballet and opera too so call me a rebel.”

“Really? Happen to have a favorite opera singer?”

“Yeah, I’ve been a fan of Luciano Pavarotti since I was a kid. Mom had the Three Tenors in Rome DVD. I must have watched the thing a million times. Still, every time I hear him sing Nessun Dorma, it’s like hearing it for the first time.”

She blinked at him and laughed,

“Ok, now I feel stupid.”

“Why?”

“I assumed you were bluffing.”

“We all know what happens when you assume.”

Nick shifted in the back again and Noelle grinned,

“Ok, ok. What about classical music?”

“What about it?”

“What was the last piece Nick played Friday before we packed up to go?”

And there it was.

“Strauss’ Emperor Waltz,” he said, like a good stalker, then decided to go all out since the cat was out of the bag anyway.

“The day before that he played Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata while you were gone, then the Turkish March. I left right after. But I can give you the line up from Wednesday and Tuesday too, if you’d like.”

She gaped at him for a few moments.

“You might wanna close you mouth,” he said, “you’ll catch something.”

Nick made a little sound in the back.

Mark had just convinced himself it must have been a snicker when Nick spoke for the first time,

“You can stop the car here.”

There was no houses in sight. Mark felt himself blush.

That was clear enough, wasn’t it? There might have been a few times in his life when he’d felt like a bigger idiot, but right then, he couldn’t recall any.

Noelle looked embarrassed as he pulled over,

“Sorry. Our mom has issues with strangers. We’ll just walk from here.”

“No problem,” Mark forced a smile that felt painful on his face, “it was fun.”

Nick got out and Noelle followed.

“Thanks again,” she said.

“Sure,” he answered gracelessly, and drove away.

As soon as Mark's car disappeared down the road, Noelle sighed. Nick knew the expression on her face well; she was deciding whether to hug him or kick him.

"Why?"

He started walking away from her, flustered and angry with himself.

"Because I didn't want him to know where we live."

But that wasn't really it, was it? No, the fact was that with each exchange between Mark and Noelle, Nick had felt more inadequate. It wasn't Noelle's fault; she'd always had this ability to converse easily with strangers. Nick had accepted the fact that he would always be the socially awkward one. If only Mark wasn't so... so goddamned perfect.

Nessun Dorma? Pavarotti?

"Why?" Noelle asked again.

"Because we live in a fucking shoebox."

He could have listened to Mark talk for hours, but what was the point? Nick couldn't stand the thought of being a charity case; Mark's good deed for the day. He felt pitiful enough without it.

"Your timing could have been better," she said.

"I know what fucking happened," he snapped, "I was there."

She stopped suddenly, her eyes growing wide,

"You like him."

Nick felt himself turn red to the roots of his hair.

"I don't wanna talk any more," he said.

What fucking difference did it make? So what if Mark was exactly the type of a guy he'd been hoping to meet one day, far away from this shitty little town and his life in it?

"I'm telling you, I think he likes you--"

"Stop! Fucking stop! No one likes anyone! Just fucking drop it!"

"Oh Nick," she said softly.

"And stop saying that! I fucking hate it! I don't need you feeling sorry for me too!"

Mark found his dad blocking the entire driveway. Some vaguely familiar looking beast sat on a lift in the middle of the asphalt, the rest of the space littered in parts and tools.

He parked on the grass and saw the next door neighbor walking her dog on the far side of the road. She looked indignant as she took in the mess and Mark had to chuckle. There would be another letter from the homeowner association arriving within a day or two.

His dad came out of the garage, wiping his hands on a dirty oil rag, and paused to wave to the neighbor. She bared her teeth at him and he grinned.

"What do you think?" he asked Mark.

"Monte Carlo. Seventy-seven?"

"You got it. There isn't many of them left in one piece."

"You call this one piece?"

“Yeah.”

“The rear end is missing,” Mark tried again.

“Oh, yeah, that’s normal. This model had issues with rear ends. They just fall off. It’s a good looking car though.”

“How much did you pay?” Mark asked, circling it.

“Six thousand.”

Mark winced.

“The engine’s only got hundred and twelve on it,” his dad added.

“The grill is pretty cool. Are those leather seats?”

“Yup. Perfect condition too.”

“What are you gonna do with it?”

“Fix it. Sell it. Unless you wanna use it before I sell it.”

Mark glanced at him in surprise,

“Me? What for?”

His dad shrugged,

“I don’t know. It would be a nice car to take to the drive-in. On a first date.”

For a few moments Mark was speechless. He looked at the car again with new eyes, imagined it clean and in one piece. Imagined Nick in it.

He couldn’t help but smile,

“You’re right. It would be a perfect first date car.”

He sobered up quickly,

“I wouldn’t hold my breath though. It might sit in the garage for a long time.”

His dad wiped a spot of grease from the grill,

“Today was a no-go?”

“I drove Nick and his sister home.”

“And?”

“And nothing. His sister did all the talking. I don’t really think I have a chance in hell.”

“You broke someone’s nose for this kid.”

Mark dug out his cigarettes,

“The two of them, they’re-- they’ve got this-- something. He plays the piano. She’s a ballet dancer. They speak five languages. And I’m not-- I’m just--“

“You don’t think you’re good enough,” his dad said, sounding surprised.

Mark avoided his eyes by scratching his head and fumbling for a lighter at the same time.

“I don’t think he likes me,” he added weakly.

“Did you talk to him at all?”

Mark shook his head.

His dad rubbed the bridge of his nose, leaving behind a streak of grease. Mark thought about pointing it out and didn’t. He’d be covered in grease by supper time anyway.

“You really like this kid.”

Mark nodded.

“Then quit pussy-footing around,” his dad said, throwing the rag in a nearby bucket, “make sure he knows it.”

“Pussy-footing?” Mark smirked.

“Damn right. If he doesn’t like you it’ll be his loss, but at least you’ll know you tried.”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“You broke someone’s nose, that’s a good start.”

“I think I’m gonna have to do better than that.”

“Try and not get arrested.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter 4

When the last bell of the day rang, Nick rushed out of the classroom as always without ever once acknowledging Mark’s existence. Determined not to feel discouraged, Mark made his way to the lobby and settled in to wait. No one stopped to bother him. He imagined that the word had spread; being gay was apparently all very well but breaking a bully’s nose was a whole different ball game. All day long he was at the receiving end of some decidedly cool stares. It didn’t bother him. It actually made him feel more at home than ever.

This time, his wait was much shorter. As soon as the school emptied out, the twins showed up.

Nick was the only one who looked surprised to see him.

“Hi,” he said quickly, before either of them had a chance to say anything,

“I was hoping you might want a ride again.”

Nick looked confused; even Noelle seemed taken aback. Neither one of them spoke.

Mark swallowed his nerves,

“I like your company. But if you want me to leave you alone, I will.”

Nick’s eyes grew wide. His mouth opened, then closed. He looked at Noelle.

Mark’s stomach fluttered like crazy. He couldn’t make heads or tails of Nick’s reaction.

Noelle met Nick’s gaze, arched her eyebrows, then turned and smiled at Mark,

“We would love another ride. Thank you.”

Nick just wouldn’t talk. All of Mark’s questions were answered by Noelle, even the few he’d managed to address directly to Nick. To be fair, she did give him the time to answer and a couple of times he actually did, as long as the answer was either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’ Then Noelle would elaborate.

She asked him to drop them off at the same place and he did so, stifling his frustration. He wanted to hear Nick speak, wanted to see him smile. He wanted some sort of a hint that the kid didn’t hate him.

The next day, the same thing. Mark was getting to know Noelle and Nick was staying silent as a ghost. He didn’t mind Noelle; she was easy to talk to and she never hesitated to say whatever was on her mind. Their conversations

easily progressed into banter where Mark gave as good as he got. The couple of times that a faint chuckle drifted over from the back seat made him feel invincible. It was a tiny little step but progress nonetheless.

Thursday afternoon Nick got a phone call from the restaurant. The dishwasher was out sick; could he come in at ten in the morning and pull a twelve hour shift? He agreed to it, his first thought the next pair of ballet slippers he would buy for Noelle. If a little money was left over, maybe even a small birthday present for her this year. It had been so long since he'd bought her something nice.

She was not so happy,

"They know you're still in school. Why didn't they call someone else?"

"There isn't anyone else."

"So you're not going to school tomorrow."

"No. I have to leave here at nine if I'm gonna be there at ten, don't I?"

"Mom's gonna be pissed."

"She'll be asleep. She won't even notice."

"What about Mark?"

Nick bent over his book so she couldn't see his face,

"What about Mark?"

"I'm sure he'll be disappointed."

His fingers tightened around the binding,

"Noelle--"

"Ok, ok, forget I said it."

Even thinking about Mark confused him. Why was the guy so persistent? His instant popularity had gone down the toilet as quickly as it had come up, all due to his stubborn insistence to be seen with Nick and Noelle on daily basis. What was he trying to prove? That he wasn't like the rest of them? It was clear as day to everyone by now. How much time did Mark intend to invest in this charity case? And why couldn't Nick put a stop to it?

He'd wanted to say no. No more rides, no more nonsense. Except that he couldn't. Noelle was right; he liked Mark. He could admit it to himself, as long as he accepted that nothing would ever happen. As long as he never, even for a moment, forgot that Mark would always be out of his reach. As long as he expected nothing and hoped for nothing. Because one of these days, Mark would meet someone like Seth O'Conner. Nick would have to live with seeing them together in school, around the town, in the restaurant. Would have to listen to whispered rumors about their dates and their sex life. It hurt to think like that but it was his own fault. He let himself enjoy the rides home, the sound of Mark's voice, the things he said. He let himself look forward to those short minutes in Mark's car; even going as far as to replay them until every moment was etched deeply into his memory, every detail stored away in incredible detail. When it all eventually comes to an end, he would have no one but himself to blame for the pain that it would cause.

Friday, there was no Nick. Mark fidgeted through the entire Latin class, millions of unlikely scenarios replaying in his mind, each one worse than the one before it. Why hadn't he insisted on driving the twins to school too? What if something happened to them on the way in? Or outside the school before the classes started? He couldn't shake the image of Nick's blood on the gray school tiles. That class was the longest forty five minutes of his life; he was sure he would go crazy before it ended.

When he saw Noelle alone in the lobby, nausea crawled up his throat.

"Hey," she said, "you don't look so good."

She wouldn't be so calm if something had happened to Nick. He was sure of it.

Still, the first thing that came out of his mouth was a breathless, "Where's Nick?"

"He decided to work instead of coming to school."

The relief almost made him lightheaded.

"Can I still have a ride?" she asked with a smirk.

"Yes," he said, feeling like an idiot, "of course."

Now that the anxiety had subsided, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. He'd had some crazy idea that he would find a way to be alone with Nick for a few moments. Maybe long enough to ask him out, if he managed to not chicken out. No chance of that now.

He made distracted small talk with Noelle until they got into the car. Then she dropped a bomb.

"You have a crush on my brother."

Mark found himself completely at a loss for words. She wasn't asking a question. She knew.

Was he that obvious? God, he wasn't ready to hear that Nick was straight. Or completely uninterested. Not now, when he was finally starting to feel like he was making a little bit of a progress. She was giving him an opportunity to lay his cards on the table and he supposed that he should be grateful for her bluntness. But instead, he found himself terrified of whatever she might have to say. Had it really progressed to far, so fast? Had he really let himself fall for a kid he'd only spoken ten words to? Maybe his mother and his shrink were right. Maybe he was a sucker for punishment.

He took a deep breath,

"I do. Have a crush on your brother. Is that a problem?"

Crap, his face was hot again. He could feel it burning.

"No," she said, "I don't have a problem with it."

"And Nick-- does he know?"

"No. I've tried hinting at it, but he doesn't believe me. Or he doesn't want to."

"Oh," Mark's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

He wasn't sure that he wanted to hear more.

"Quit looking like I gave you a death sentence," she said, sounding exasperated,

"I didn't say he doesn't like you. I'm almost sure he does even though he's trying to hide it."

Out of countless possible reasons that Nick would have to hide the fact that he might like Mark, Mark could only focus on one. His own reflection in the mirror, the scar running down his cheek.

It was stupid. Nick would never be so shallow. Except that he didn't really know the kid at all, did he? He had no clue what Nick thought of him.

She groaned,

"I shouldn't really be saying any of this. He'd kill me. But I don't want him to get hurt. Nick, he's-- awkward with people. He's always been like that, except that it got worse after the accident. Over the last four years he's the one who got the brunt of the abuse too. This town," he voice turned bitter, "they've done their damn best to convince him that he's something to be despised. That's he's worthless. He's learned to expect the worst from people."

"He doesn't trust me."

"No, I don't think that's it. He's just afraid of getting hurt."

"I wouldn't--" Mark spluttered indignantly, "I would never--"

"I know that," she snorted, "you're almost as easy to read as he is. Do you think I would be talking to you at all if I thought you would hurt him?"

Mark closed his mouth.

"I just didn't want you to get discouraged."

He glanced at her, "So... you think I have a chance?"

She nodded decisively, "Yeah. I'd say you have a pretty good chance."

When they pulled up to the place where Mark usually dropped them off, she told him to just keep driving.

"I thought your mom didn't like strangers."

"She doesn't but she's not home. She leaves for work at two. Nick was just embarrassed to show you where we live."

Mark took the next right and drove through the park slowly, realizing with a pang that most of the trailers could fit in his father's living room.

"It's the last one on the left," she said, "The one with the green mail box."

Mark parked in front of it, his stomach sinking. It was the size of a bus.

"What?" she said.

"It's so small," he said, unthinking.

"Really," she countered coolly, "I hadn't noticed."

Catching the tone of her voice, he flamed red again, feeling like an ass,

"That's not-- I didn't mean it like that. It's just-- when you said you didn't have a piano at home I didn't think the space for one would be an issue."

Now she looked truly puzzled,

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I bought one."

"One what?"

"A piano. For Nick."

She blinked,

"I'm sorry, I think I have something crazy stuck in my ear. You did what?"

"I bought a piano. For Nick. They delivered it yesterday."

She started at him for a full minute without saying a word. If he didn't feel so stupid, it would have been funny, the expression on her face. As it was, he wished the ground would swallow him. Why did he even mention it?

"You bought a piano," she said finally, in a tone that suggested he might be mentally impaired,

"For Nick. You bought Nick a piano."

"It's just an upright," he said defensively,

"and it's used. Someone is coming tomorrow to make sure it's tuned properly."

"You bought a piano to give to Nick."

"It's not that crazy," he muttered.

She barked a nearly hysterical laugh,

"You bought a fucking piano!"

"Yes," he said again, patiently,

"because you said he didn't have one. Can we get past this?"

"No!" she sounded incredulous,

"we can not 'get past this.' What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that Nick needed a piano in order to play."

"So you bought one!"

"I believe we already established that," he said through gritted teeth.

"What were you gonna do? Slap a bow on it and drive it to school?"

"I don't know. I was still working on that."

"What did you think Nick was gonna say? 'Oh, thanks, I needed one of those?'"

"Alright, I obviously didn't think this through. There's no space in there for a piano?"

"There's barely enough space in there for a chair!"

Mark sighed,

"I'm an idiot."

"You can say that again."

"Please don't tell him?"

"That you're an idiot?"

"That I bought a piano."

"He wouldn't believe me even if I told him. I'm not sure I believe it myself."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"I told you he's working, right?"

"Yeah. At the restaurant?"

"Yup. He's on until ten tonight, then he's walking home."

Mark frowned,

"That seems like a really long way to walk that late at night."

"Jesus, you *are* an idiot," she rolled her eyes and got out of the car,

“Here’s a suggestion. Start small and do something about it.”

Nick stepped outside, saw the car and immediately backed up, colliding with Tony.

Tony grunted,

“Jesus, kid, what is it?”

Nick’s face flooded in color, his heart suddenly beating like crazy. It was Mark; it had to be. No one else had a car like that. What was he doing here?

Tony followed his gaze and frowned. Mark was just getting out. He leaned against the car and tucked his hands in his pockets.

‘He’s here for me,’ Nick thought incredulously.

No. There had to be a reasonable explanation. Maybe Noelle had left a sweater in his car. Maybe Mark was meeting someone here. People did that often; they left their cars in the parking lot overnight to go to parties or on dates in a single vehicle.

“Nick,” Tony said, sounding worried, “do you want me to go over there and tell him to get lost?”

“What?”

Nick finally noticed that he was blocking the way out. Tony’s two hundred and some odd pounds needed the entire doorway and not an inch less. If his face turned any redder, Nick would just self-combust.

“No,” he said quickly, “he’s-- he’s a friend.”

Tony’s eyebrows climbed half way up his forehead and Nick could hardly blame him for being skeptical. In all the years they’d worked together, the word ‘friend’ had never once crossed Nick’s lips.

“Are you sure?”

Feeling an overwhelming wave of affection for the big man, Nick nodded,

“I’m sure.”

He wasn’t sure of anything though.

“Why is he here? Is he giving you a ride home?”

That was the only explanation that made sense, wasn’t it?

“I don’t know,” he said, “but you don’t have to worry. He’s ok.”

“I worry about you all the time kid.”

Nick finally stepped out so Tony could lock the back door. Mark saw them and straightened, pulling his hands out of his pockets and tucking his hair behind his ears.

Tony glared in his direction,

“Make sure he knows I’ve got his plate number.”

Nick smiled,

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, sure. If you’re not here by noon tomorrow I’m sending cops to his house.”

“You’re not working tomorrow.”

“He doesn’t know that. Just be careful.”

"I'm always careful."

Tony grunted again and made his way across the parking lot to his truck. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Nick focused on walking towards Mark without tripping. The night was damp and cold, yet he found himself sweating profusely, gripping the insides of his pockets to keep his hands from shaking.

Mark smiled at him and Nick felt it like a punch to the stomach, leaving him breathless.

"Hi," Mark said, and Nick smiled back at him tentatively, aware as always that his bottom teeth were slightly crooked.

"Hi."

"It's seems kind of cold for a walk," Mark said, "I was hoping you'd want a ride instead."

Stupid, uncontrollable joy lodged in Nick's throat and he had to force himself to breathe before he could answer.

"Sure. Thank you."

He blushed again when Mark beat him to the passenger door and held it open for him. The interior looked freshly cleaned, although it still smelled like leather and cigarettes.

Mark slid into the driver's seat and Nick pressed his knees together to stop his legs from shaking too. They pulled out of the parking lot and into the darkness.

For a while neither one of them spoke. The heat kicked on and Nick realized that his face and hands were freezing despite the fact that sweat coated him from head to toe. Mark shrugged out of his jacket while driving and Nick caught another scent, a mix of cut grass and cool citrus. The thought that the scent might be coming from Mark's skin made him lightheaded.

"Do you work every weekend?"

This is where Noelle would jump in to answer for him. Except that Noelle wasn't there. He fought the resulting panic. He could do this. He could talk to someone like a normal person.

"Yes. I mean, no. Every Friday and Saturday."

"You're off Sundays?"

Nick nodded but Mark was looking at the road and couldn't see it.

"Yes," he said.

"Does Noelle work?"

"No."

"How come?"

"She does... other stuff."

How was he supposed to explain that Noelle did everything their mother couldn't?

"What does your mom do?"

Nick was starting to feel nauseous. This line of questions could easily lead in the direction where he didn't want it to go. The accident, the pile of debt, his mother's insane work hours, everything Nick refused to talk about.

"She's a nursing assistant," he said softly.

"Rehab?"

"No. Alzheimer's."

“My grandpa had Alzheimer’s,” Mark said, “but he was the harmless kind. Used to wander off and not be able to find his way home. He couldn’t remember how old he was or how to put his pants on but he was never unpleasant about it. Used to laugh at everything; he was actually kind of fun to be around.”

Nick felt braver with each sentence.

“What does you dad do?” he asked.

“He restores classic cars.”

“Like yours?”

“Yeah. He’s not picky either. A lot of times he’ll just drag a skeleton home and rebuild the whole thing.”

“He must be really good then.”

“Crazy good,” Mark smiled, “I hope I’m half as good one day.”

“You’re gonna do the same thing?”

“Yup. Gonna be a glorified mechanic. Or at least that’s the plan for now. What about you?”

Nick shrugged. He would be going to work full time after High School. Tony had been showing him how to do the prep work. Hopefully, Nick would get promoted and start making an extra few dollars an hour. It sounded pathetic even in his own head so he didn’t say any of it.

“I don’t know yet.”

“No college?”

“Can’t afford it,” he said calmly, but inside he felt small and worthless.

God knows he’d thought about it. He could easily get scholarships to at least two of the local music schools. For the rest he could take out student loans. Paying for college would not be a problem. The problem would be leaving school and leaving mom to pay off the debts on her own. Noelle will be getting a job after High School too, but Nick hoped to make enough money to render her income insignificant. He still planned to convince her that she, at least, needs to go to college.

How was he to even begin trying to explain something like that to Mark. How could Mark ever understand it?

“I’m sorry,” Mark said, “I didn’t mean to sound like I’m prodding. For some reason whenever I’m around you, everything I say comes out wrong. I just keep sticking my foot in my mouth. You probably think I’m an idiot.”

Nick blushed furiously again,

“No. I don’t-- think that.”

They drove past the point where Mark usually dropped them off after school and Nick realized that Noelle must have shown him where they lived. He found himself mortified as they pulled up to the trailer. God, had it always looked so shabby?

He fumbled with the door handle.

“Wait,” Mark said, something clumsy and awkward coloring his voice, “I’m-- I wanted to-- Could I pick you up again? Tomorrow? From work. I promise to try and not stick my foot in my mouth again.”

Nick knew he should say no. He didn’t know what Mark wanted from him, but whatever it was, it would not end well. Nothing ever did. Another few minutes in the car and he would have sweated through his sweater. Still, those

minutes had been the most nerve wrecking, exhilarating, earth moving minutes in his life. A part of him wanted to huddle under the comforter and never come out again. A part of him wanted to stay in the car forever.

He nodded.

Mark's answering smile made his knees weak.

The entire next day, Nick ran on autopilot. It felt like someone else was doing all the things he usually did and Nick was just watching, too preoccupied with the thoughts of Mark to be able to focus on anything else. Ordinarily, it would have been the type of workday to give him nightmares. Tony was off so he got no help. Two waitresses called out and the dishwasher was still out sick. Nick ended up doing two jobs at once and getting stuck with locking up all by himself. It was a good thing that Tony had taught him how to do the prep work for the following day because there was no one else in the restaurant who knew how to do it. It took him an hour to get it all settled too. He just couldn't concentrate. He kept forgetting what he was doing and having to backtrack. It was so hard to worry about silly things when the time he was supposed to meet Mark kept looming closer with each second.

At ten minutes past ten he rushed out the back door, a part of him believing that Mark wouldn't have bothered waiting, a part of him sure that Mark had never even showed up in the first place. Only when the lock clicked behind him did he remember his sweater, still hanging on the hook in the employee break room. The cold wind hit him and he called himself every kind of idiot there was. If Mark decided not to show, Nick would freeze to death before he even made it half way home.

Mark was there though, parked in the same spot, standing outside of the car, the collar of his leather jacket turned up against the wind. Nick made his way towards the car, wondering again how long this could possibly last. How long before Mark decided that Nick wasn't worth the time or effort. Why was the man so persistent? What could he possibly find appealing or interesting about Nick?

When Mark smiled at him, Nick's heart betrayed him all over again, blood rushing to his face, his chest filling with warmth. Nothing else mattered. Even if it all ended badly, even if it broke him, at least he had this. These times alone in the car with Mark, the smiles, the feeling of being special. Could he really ask for more?

Mark opened the car door for him and Nick gratefully slid inside and away from the wind. He felt frozen to the bone already. Had Mark not shown up he would have had to run home the entire way just to keep warm. When Mark turned the car on and the first blast of hot air hit him, Nick shivered so violently that his teeth clicked.

"Here," Mark said, shrugging out of his jacket.

"No, no," Nick stuttered, "I'm fine."

"Your teeth are chattering. Take the jacket."

Nick took it reverently. It was heavy and warm and supple. It smelled like cut grass, citrus and cigarettes. His throat locked up at the scent and his hands shook harder than ever as he awkwardly put it on.

"Thank you," he said softly, wondering if Mark thought him an idiot for not having a jacket.

He glanced at him and saw that Mark was smiling.

"It looks good on you," he said.

They talked about music.

Music was Nick's comfort zone; it was one subject where he never felt inferior. He was awed all over again by Mark's knowledge of classical music, by his adoration for Rostropovich, Denes Varjon, and Eugeniusz Chudak. He found out that Mark owned a piano and had taken some lessons but never really excelled at them. That he preferred the string instruments and only after a failed experiments with violin and cello did he finally find his fit with a guitar. "Mom was a little put off," he said, rolling his eyes, "she called it a 'common instrument,' whatever that means." "I'd like to hear you play," Nick blurted out and was shocked to see faint color creep up Mark's neck even as his own reddened again.

"I'm not very good," Mark said awkwardly.

After a moment, he smiled, "But I'll look forward to embarrassing myself as long as you promise not to laugh."

"I promise," Nick said.

Too soon they were in front of the trailer. It had started raining by then, a cold drizzle pushed sideways by the wind. The sort of a miserable, insistent rain that made raincoats and umbrellas useless.

Nick tried to shrug out of the jacket and Mark stopped him,

"No, don't do that. I'll walk you to the door. You can give it back then."

Despite Nick's protests, Mark got out of the car in a tee shirt and was dripping wet by the time they both ducked inside the miniature porch.

Nick tried to take the jacket off again and Mark's hands closed over his, pressing them into the leather. A current traveled through Nick's hands, arms, racing through his chest and down his spine. Mark looked like he would say something, then he simply leaned forward and brushed his lips against Nick's.

Nick's heart stopped. His face tingled. It was all over in the blink of an eye.

"Keep it," Mark said, "it looks better on you."

Squeezing Nick's hand lightly, he let go and was already inside his car before Nick could move again.

Noelle found him standing in the kitchen, still leaning on the door.

"Are you ok? What happened?"

What happened?

Mark had kissed him.

Mark had kissed him.

A sharp coil of heat squeezed around his stomach, both sweet and painful at once. Holy crap. Mark had kissed him.

He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. He opened his mouth to tell Noelle and nothing came out.

"Nick? What happened?"

He took a deep breath and it came back out as a shuddery, unrecognizable laugh. He could still feel Mark's fingers pressing against his own. The quick brush of his rain slicked lips.

"Say something," she snapped.

"He kissed me."

Was that his voice? It sounded hoarse and unrecognizable.

“I knew it!” she squealed, “I knew it! I fucking told you so, you idiot!”

She did. But how was he supposed to believe it? Even now, there’s was an urge to deny it, to find some ulterior motive, some reason that made sense in Nick’s world. Because Mark actually liking him? It still seemed impossible.

“Come on, I wanna know everything! What happened? What did he say? What did you say? What are you wearing?”

“His jacket. He gave me his jacket. To wear. It’s raining. He said to keep it-- that it looks better on me.”

“Well he’s not wrong,” she said, but her eyes were shining and she was vibrating, her excitement contagious.

“I can’t believe he kissed me.”

“Well I can. I’ve been trying to tell you he likes you.”

Except what if Mark regretted it? What if he’d changed his mind already? Every possibility seemed more likely than the one he desperately wanted.

Suddenly he had a horrifying picture of Monday coming around and Mark ignoring him completely like nothing had happened.

His stomach turned violently and he felt like throwing up. This is the closest he’d ever gotten to anyone aside from Noelle. Ever. In his entire life, he’d never told someone so much about himself. He’d never opened up the way he had with Mark. And what if it was all some elaborate plan intended to hurt Nick? He wasn’t paranoid. The idea wasn’t so farfetched. After all, there were dozens of people in this town who had gone to greater lengths to make him miserable.

God, he was gonna be sick.

“Nick? Hey, no. Don’t do that.”

“I’m not,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

But he was. He was about to panic.

“I’m gonna-- shower,” he said, pushing past her despite her protests and closing himself in the bathroom.

Under the hot stream of water he let himself pant, the despair flooding him until he was lightheaded. He pictured every horrifying scenario, each one worse than the next, Mark ignoring him, Mark moving on, Mark taking Seth O’Conner out, Mark laughing with Rose and the rest of them, Mark telling everyone how gullible he was, how desperate for someone to like him. He wanted to scream.

He stayed in until the water turned cold and he felt physically battered all over. He avoided the mirror. He wished he was dead.

Noelle had already curled up in her cot, the covers pulled up to her chin. He crawled under his covers and turned away from her.

“You’re not being fair to him,” she said softly,

“I know you, I know what you’re thinking. The next time you see him, you’re gonna hurt him just so he can’t hurt you first, and that’s not fair. He likes you.”

Nick said nothing.

--

Monday morning he woke up an hour early, coated in sweat. He couldn't remember his dreams but they had been dark and unpleasant. He dressed in the darkness, quietly, so Noelle could keep sleeping. Then he slipped out the front door and sat down on the small porch, watching the sky lighten.

He was ready. He was ready for every awful, unbearable scenario the day could possibly throw at him. He'd gone over every single one a million times. There was nothing anyone could say or do to him that he hadn't thought of already. He would survive today like he'd survived all the other nightmare days in this fucking town. He ignored the small voice in the back of his head that reminded him he didn't have to. If it got to be too much, there was always the small bottle of Vicodin in the medicine cabinet, and he was always a handful of pills away from blessed peace and silence. He'd never admit it, even to himself, but it was as good of a back up plan as any.

Mark's jacket was still hanging in the kitchen. Noelle had suggested the night before that he wear it to school. Nick hadn't dignified that with a response and luckily, she'd decided to let it go. He could hear her now, rustling around the kitchen. He saw her face in the window out of the corner of his eye and wondered if she would come outside and berate him for being an idiot. She didn't.

For the millionth time in the last twenty four hours, he considered just not going to school. That would be the safest way to handle this. If he was hiding under the covers all day, nothing could hurt him. And he was so tired. He'd barely slept at all since Saturday night, just a few hours here and there, hours full of miserable dreams. The trailer park was silent and gloomy, the air damp, and he already felt like he was sleepwalking.

When the familiar black car pulled up next to the trailer, he blinked at it for a second, pretty sure he was just dreaming again. Until Mark got out.

Nick froze, all air leaving his lungs at once. His stomach constricted.

This wasn't happening. It wasn't. He wasn't ready. Why did he think he would ever be ready?

Mark saw him, surprise flickering over his face. Then he smiled, a ridiculous smile Nick could actually feel in his spine, his fingertips, his throat.

"Good morning," Mark said, the words making Nick jump.

He stood up quickly, too quickly. His foot had fallen asleep and he nearly fell backwards into the doorway.

Mark paused at the edge of the porch as if he could sense Nick's panic.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I was thinking-- I was hoping I could drive you and Noelle to school. It's kind of cold and wet and-- I guess I wasn't really thinking."

He looked sheepish,

"Because you're looking at me like I'm a creepy stalker so... this was obviously a stupid idea, huh?"

Nick didn't know what to say. He was horribly aware of the fact that he hadn't bothered to pull a brush through his hair, that he looked like he hadn't slept in two days, that he was wearing a shirt so old it had started to grow ragged around the hem. The door opened behind him and he nearly cried with relief. As soon as Noelle stepped outside he slipped past her and into the safety of the trailer, closing the door behind him.

He stood there for a moment, listening to the murmur of their voices, telling himself to breathe. Then he practically ran to the bathroom, shedding the ratty shirt on the way. Brushed his hair and teeth with shaky hands, all the while waiting to hear the rumble of the car starting and Mark pulling away. But it didn't happen. Even as he took an extra

five minutes trying to find a shirt that didn't look like it had been rescued from Salvation Army, he could hear no sounds from the outside. His head was a wreck. He couldn't string two coherent thoughts together. If only his hands would stop shaking, maybe he would stop feeling like he would fly apart.

Noelle came back inside and found him standing in the bathroom doorway, trying not to hyperventilate.

"He said he'd leave if you want him to. He apologized for coming unannounced like a million times. Do you want me to tell him to go?"

Yes. He wanted him to leave. He wanted to rewind to four hours ago, he wanted to get up, take a shower, and be outside with a cup of coffee, looking presentable. He wanted all of this to be another nightmare.

"Nick? If you don't want him to leave then you need to go out there and tell him to stop freaking out."

"He's freaking out?"

"Yes, he's freaking out. You stormed off without saying anything. He thinks you're mad or upset of God knows what. Go out there."

"Come with me."

She rolled her eyes,

"I'm not going to school in pajama pants. I need to change, just-- go out there, I'll be right behind you."

"What do I say to him?"

"Tell him you're not used to humans before coffee," she pushed him towards the door, "Go."

Mark was standing right outside the tiny porch, hands tucked in the pockets of his jacket. He was wearing a pea coat, probably because Nick still had his leather jacket. Should he offer to give it back?

"Hi," Mark said quickly, "I know I freaked you out and I'm sorry. I can go if you want me to. But I really did just wanna give you a ride so you don't have to walk. And I wanted-- I wanted to see you again and didn't wanna wait until the last class."

Nick felt his face heat. What was he supposed to say to that?

"Are you mad at me?" Mark asked.

Nick shook his head. He should say something. Anything.

"No," he said, "I'm not-- used to people. Before coffee."

"Oh," Mark grinned, his entire face lighting up, "I get that. Dad and I-- we usually drink a ton in the morning before we even talk to each other. So this is okay? Coming to pick you up? Because I'd like to do that. Every morning. If you don't mind. I don't wanna seem like a creepy stalker."

Every morning. Seeing Mark every morning and every afternoon. How was this happening?

"No, it's-- it's fine."

"Good," Mark said, still grinning, "That's great. Um-- also, I was wondering--"

The creak of the door interrupted him and Noelle stepped out, her backpack slung over her shoulder.

"I'm ready," she said.

--

Getting out of Mark's car in the school parking lot was even more stressful than getting into it at the end of the day. The parking lot was full. Everyone was staring. Nick felt like every gaze, every laugh was directed at them. Why was Mark doing this? In one move, he was basically inviting hate from the entire school. And he didn't look bothered at all. He was smiling the entire time, his focus constantly on Nick, as it had been for days now whenever they were together, as if there was nothing else around him. It was crazy. Maybe Nick was going crazy and all of this was just a figment of his imagination.

They separated in the lobby, agreeing to meet again at the end of the day so Mark can give them a ride home. Nick walked to his first class feeling like he was sleepwalking. He thought he finally understood where phrase 'walking on clouds' came from. He was five feet away from the classroom when someone slammed into him and sent him flying into the wall. His shoulder struck it with force, a sharp pain shooting across his shoulder blades. He didn't look up to see who it was. He didn't make a sound. He straightened back up and continued on to the classroom, his shoulder throbbing. At least he knew that he wasn't sleepwalking now.

After school, Mark was waiting for them again. He drove them home, but this time, Nick took the passenger seat. He didn't say much on the drive back, it was mainly Noelle and Mark who talked, but it still felt nerve wrecking, to be so close to him, to continuously feel Mark's gaze on his face.

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The next morning when Mark pulled up, Nick was as ready as he would ever be. He'd been up for an hour, had showered, dressed, and had almost finished the tiny cup of mom's instant coffee. He'd checked his appearance a dozen times and changed his shirt twice. He went as far as to consider putting on the leather jacket, but not as far as to actually pick the thing up. He was nervous and excited, and a part of him still expected that Mark would not show up. But Mark did.

He got out of the car, grinning wide, a cup of coffee in each hand. Nick smiled back tentatively, and got to his feet. He supposed that an extra cup of coffee should have made it obvious, but he was still surprised when Mark offered it to him.

"It's from a little convenience store near my house. They make really good coffee."

Nick took the cup and managed to say a stuttering thanks.

After a few moments of silence where Nick became more and more aware of how awkward he was at making any sort of conversation, even after having some practice, Mark cleared his throat.

"So, um-- I wanted to ask you if-- you'd maybe like to go to a movie with me. Some night you're not working."

Nick felt his face heat again and he looked away, panic climbing up his throat. Was he being asked on a date? Was Mark actually asking him out? He wanted to cry. What now? If he said no, Mark might be disappointed. He might not ask again. He might leave and not come back. But if he said yes he'd probably just make an ass out of himself. He'd never been on a date before. He'd never kissed anyone before. He didn't know what he was supposed to do on a date. And the longer he took not saying anything, the worse he felt.

"Hey," Mark said, "You don't have to answer now, it's not-- just think about it? Maybe? I can ask again in a couple of days? And you don't have to answer then either, if you don't want to. How does that sound?"

Nick felt stupid. And relieved. And stupid at feeling relieved.

"Yeah, ok," he said, "couple of days."

"Okay," Mark said, smiling as if Nick had said yes, "Good. Couple of days. No pressure."

It was beautiful.

Mark shut the headlights off but the entire marsh was bathed in the light of the full moon, the salt grass moving slowly in the breeze. The sand dunes in the distance resembled mountains and hills, and everything around them looked like it was plucked out of a dream.

"Come on," Mark said, and got out of the car.

Nick followed.

Scent of salt and sea assaulted his nostrils. His eyes watered. The breeze cut through his shirt and he folded his arms. But even so, it was gorgeous. Quiet, a world removed from everything and everyone.

Mark came around the car to stand next to him.

"Do you like it?" he asked, his voice hushed.

Nick was already smiling,

"Yeah. I do. It's beautiful."

They stood there in silence for a few moments, watching the gauzy clouds moving over the moon. The Mark shifted his feet.

"Can-- can I kiss you?"

Nick felt his breath catch.

Yes. Here and now, under the moonlight, feeling like he'd never seen something so beautiful, Nick wanted to be kissed. If he'd ever let himself fantasize about his first real kiss, he would have probably imagined something like

this. Something he never would've thought was possible. On a gorgeous night, after holding someone's hand through a movie, feeling giddy and happy.

"I'm sorry," Mark said, when it looked like Nick wouldn't answer, "I didn't mean to--"

"Yes. You can," Nick cut him off.

He told himself he was shaking because of the breeze. That he was clutching himself tighter because it was chilly.

"Are you sure?" Mark asked.

Not sure he could actually speak again, Nick just nodded.

When Mark moved to stand in front of him, Nick focused somewhere below his chin, his stomach tightening almost painfully. He thought Mark would just lean in like he did last time, but instead, Mark's hand came up and cupped his cheek, tipping his head up. His thumb brushed over Nick's cheekbone, making him shiver. Their noses brushed first, Mark's breath ghosting over his mouth. Then there was sweet pressure against his lips, nothing like the fleeting brush of the last time. Nick felt it all the way down to his toes. His entire spine tingled. Mark's mouth moved against his slowly, every tiny bit of pressure more intense until Nick started feeling lightheaded. He found himself reaching up with one hand and finding the rough texture of Mark's jacket, then gripping it lightly to stay grounded.